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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Joint written statement submitted by the International Movement of the Apostolate of Children, a non-governmental organization on the Roster, and Pax Christi, International Catholic Peace Movement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 March 1999]

Children need peace: they have a right to it
(Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace, 1999)

1. Pax Christi, an international Catholic peace movement, and the International Movement of the Apostolate of Children (MIDADE) another international Catholic movement, are convinced that children have the capacity to take responsibility for their own lives, to defend their rights and to build a world of peace. We deeply believe that children are bridges to peace and have a right to this peace.

2. As international Catholic movements, Pax Christi and MIDADE are committed to action and advocacy in defence of the rights of all children. Children affected by armed conflict, either as soldiers or as victims, have a special claim on our commitment. The direct involvement of children in armed conflict clearly violates their right to life. Such involvement jeopardizes their health, their security and their psychological development; it deprives children of their rights to education, adequate health care, leisure and a safe and nurturing environment.

Child soldiers

3. We regard the use of children in combat, either as soldiers or in various auxiliary roles, as a violation of their dignity and their fundamental rights. For this reason, we are taking an active part in the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. One of the key elements of this campaign is advocacy for the adoption of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This protocol would raise the minimum age of recruitment or military service from 15 to 18 years.

4. We also strongly urge that the use of child soldiers be included in the text of the proposed new Convention of the ILO as one of the "worst forms of child labour".

5. In its advocacy for children's rights Pax Christi supports the movement for the ratification of the Statute of the International Criminal Court. By the terms of the Statute the Court will be able to prosecute as a war crime the conscription or enlistment of children for service in armed conflict.

Child victims of armed conflict

6. Among what Mr. Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children in armed conflict, called "the abominations committed against children in the context of armed conflict" (A/53/482, para. 13), must be reckoned the killing, maiming or injury of thousands of children each month by antipersonnel landmines. Pax Christi is active in lobbying Governments to implement the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Landmines and on their Destruction concluded in Ottawa in 1997. This treaty must be effectively implemented by the establishment of programmes for mine clearance, mine awareness, and the rehabilitation of mine survivors. We believe it is a matter of justice that funds used to manufacture, export and sow these

barbarous weapons should be matched or exceeded by funds for their removal or deactivation and for the physical and psychological rehabilitation of mine victims.

7. The thousands of children who suffer and die each month because of sanctions regimes, particularly in Iraq, are also among the innocent victims of armed conflict. Pax Christi urges an increased international effort to end the appalling suffering of these children. We endorse and pledge our support to the Special Representative for children and armed conflict in his efforts to explore and pursue child-focused exemptions to all sanctions regimes.

8. Another soul-blighting effect of armed conflict on children is their experience of a precarious life as refugees or displaced persons. More than half of the 24 million people who are refugees or displaced persons are children. We support the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Special Representative for children and armed conflict in their collaboration to promote the protection of refugee and internally displaced children.

Armed conflict and the right to education

9. Because it disrupts all the normal patterns of life, armed conflict violates children's right to education. Armed conflict plays havoc with the opportunity for regular schooling and for an education which furthers the full development of children's personalities and the strengthening of "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 26). Children who are taught the arts of war are denied the opportunity to learn the arts of peace - how to resolve conflicts without recourse to violence and how to live peacefully with all racial and religious groups "in the spirit of respect, dignity and tolerance." (Preamble, Convention on the Rights of the Child).

10. Education, especially education for peace and mutual understanding, can be a means to prevent conflict. In a post-conflict society such education can help to rebuild a culture of peace. It can also help to provide alternative opportunities for service for young people and de-mystify the appeal of being a soldier. In their various peace education programmes for children and families Pax Christi and MIDADE endeavour to contribute to a climate of understanding, respect and tolerance between peoples and between ethnic and religious groups.

11. The year 1999 will mark the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In honouring this anniversary Pax Christi International and MIDADE join other non-governmental organizations in calling on Governments to enhance their implementation of the Convention, and in particular to protect children from the scourge of war. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children have the right to grow up in and contribute to a culture of peace and non-violence (arts. 24, 27, 28, 31). Pax Christi and MIDADE are committed to promoting and protecting that right.